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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-07

INFO OCT-01 SS-14 ISO-00 NSC-05 NSCE-00 INR-05 CIAE-00
PM-03 DODE-00 SP-02 SSM-01 H-01 DHA-02 ORM-01 CU-02
IGA-01 /045 W
----------281737Z 011469 /43
R 281530Z DEC 76
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1103
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 8825

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, SY, US
SUBJECT: HADASSAH VISIT TO DAMASCUS - STATUS OF SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY.

REF: (A) STATE 270455, (B) STATE 298502, (C) DAMASCUS 7648

1. SUMMARY

FIRST VISIT TO SYRIA BY MAJOR U.S. JEWISH ORGANIZATION PASSED UNEVENTFULLY 26-28 WITH SYRIAN OFFICIALS KEEPING CAREFUL DISTANCE. IN DECEMBER 27 MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR, LEADER OF HADASSAH GROUP TOURING ME, CHARLOTTE JACOBSON, STRESSED INTEREST IN PROMOTING PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONTACT AND LARGELY AVOIDING ARAB-ISRAELI POLITICAL QUESTIONS. GROUP EXPRESSED GRAT INTEREST IN QUESTIONS OF TREATMENT AND EMIGRATION OF SYRIAN JEWS. AMBASSADOR DESCRIBED EVOLUTION OF SYRIAN'S POLICY TOWARDS SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY. GROUP LATER TOURED GOVERNMENT HOSPITAL AND JEWISH QUARTER. CONFIDENTIAL

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END SUMMARY.

2. AMBASSADOR MET DECEMBER 27 WITH VISITING GROUP OF 16 HADASSAH WOMEN, LED BY CHARLOTTE JACOBSON, AND THREE HUSBANDS WHO ACCOMPANIED GROUP. ON PREVIOUS DAY GROUP HAD TOURED DAMASCUS AND MET WITH CONGRESSMAN STEPHEN SOLARZ. THEY

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LATER VISITED GOVERNMENT HOSPITAL AND DAMASCUS
JEWISH QUARTER, INCLUDING SYNAGOGUE AND PRINCIPAL SCHOOL.
IN WELCOMING REMARKS. AMBASSADOR BRIEFLY OUTLINED DEVELOP-
MENT OF SYRO-U.S. RELATIONS SINCE REESTABLISHMENT DIPLOMATIC
RELATIONS AND THEN OPENED SESSION TO QUESTIONS.

3. JACOBSON SAID GROUP BELIEVED THAT NEED EXISTS FOR
PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONTACTS TO COMPLEMENT DIPLMATIC NEGOTIAA
TIONS IN AREA. SHE CITED THEIR GROUP'S MEETING WITH
MRS. SADAT IN WHICH THEY HAD DISCUSSED VALUE OF WOMEN'S
INITIATIVES, SUCH AS HAD BEEN TAKING PLACE IN NORTHERN
IRELAND, TO BRING BLOODSHED TO AN END. NOTED THAT ALL
WOMEN ON DELEGATION HAD EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE IN HOSPITAL
AFFAIRS, MOST OF THEM SERVING CURRENTTY ON BOARDS OF
DIRECTORS OF THEIR LOCAL HOSPTIALS. GROUP WISHED TO MEET
OFFICIALS CONCERNED WITH ISSUES OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELFARE
RATHER THAN FOREIGN MINISTER THIS WAS SHY WHE HAD ASKED
SYRIAN AMBASSADOR KABBANI IN WASHINGTON TO ARRANGE MEETING
WITH MINISTER HEALTH AND MINISTER CULTURE, THE LATTER BEING
THE ONLY WOMEN IN THE SYRIAN CABINET. IN LONGER TERM,
JACOBSON SAID GROUP HOPED TO PROMOTE CULTURAL AND PROFESSIONAL
CONTACTS BETWEEN ARABS AND ISRAELIS, SUCH AS MEDICAL SEMINARS
UNDER AUSPICES OF MAJOR U.S. MEDICAL GROUP REGIONAL
HEALTH MATTERS. (NOTED IN PASSING HER REGRET THAT HADASSAH
HAS YET BEEN UNABLE TO RECRUIT ARAB DOCTORS TO SERVE ON THS
STAFFS OF THE HOSPITALS WHICH IT OPERATES IN JERUSALEM
DESPITE FACT THAT 25 PERCENT OF PATIENTS TREATED THERE
ARE ARAB.) JACBSON SAID THAT GROUP FEELS THAT ARAB LEADERS
SEEMED REALLY TO WANT PEACE BUY DID NOT APPAR TO BE TAKING
CONCRETE ACTIONS TO EDUCATE THEIR POEPLE ON NEED FOR PEACE.
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GROUP, HOWEVER, PREFERRED AVOID POLITICAL QUESTIONS WHICH
BEST LEFT TO CONCERNED GOVERNMENTS.

4. JACOBSON THEN SAID GROUP WAS ALSO CONCERNED ABOUT
SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY, HAD DISCUSSED THEIR STATUS WITH
CONGRESSMAN SOLARZ, AND PLANNED TO VISIT COMMUNITY THAT
AFTERNOON. STRESSED THAT HADASSAH GROUP DID NOT WISH TO
CAUSE COMMUNITY ANY DIFFICULTIES BUT TO ASSURE THEM OF OUT-
SIDE INTEREST IN THEIR WELFARE. SHE ASKED IF SYRIA
COULD BE PERSUADED TO ALLOW UNMARRIED WOMEN IN JEWISH
COMMUNITY TO LEAVE FOR THE STATES. NUMBER, SHE UNDERSTOOD,
WAS ABOUT 400.

5. AMBASSADOR REPLIED THAT SYRIANS WELL AWARE THAT FOR-
BIDDING EMIRGATION OF JEWS WHO UNABLE TO MARRY BECAUSE OF
LACK OF ELIGIBLE MEN IN COMMUNITY WAS INDEFENSIBLE ON
HUMANITARIAN GROUNDS. SYRIAN OFFICIALS HAD, HOWEVER,
BEEN GENERALLY UNWILLING TO DISCUSS THE ISSUE OF EMIGRATION,

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SAYING THAT THEIR POLICY FORBIDDING EMIRGATION OF SYRIAN
JEWS WAS "MATTER OF PRINCIPLE." PRESIDENT ASAD, HAD, HOW-
EVER, TOLD SOLARZ ON CONGRESSMAN'S 1975 VISIT THAT FACT
SYRIA REMAINED IN STATE OF WAR WITH ISRAEL MEENT
HE COULD DO NOTHING WHICH WOULD STRENGTHEN THAT STATE.
TO ALLOW EMIGRATION OF SYRIAN JEWS, SOME OF WHOM COULD END
UP IN ISRAEL, PRESIDENT MAINTAINED, WOULD ENTAIL STRENGTHEN-
ING ISRAEL. PRESIDENT HAD ADDED THAT SINCE SYRIA WAS SEEKING
CONVINCE USSR AND OTHER COMMUNIST STATES WITH JEWISH POPULA-
TIONS NOT TO PERMIT EMIGRATION OF THEIR COMMUNITIES TO ISRAEL,
IT WOULD BE INCONSISTENT FOR HIM TO SANCTION EMIGRATION FROM
SYRIA. AMBASSADOR THEN REVIEWED SYRIA'S DIVERSE ETHNIC AND
RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION AND SARG'S LONG-STANDING EFFORTS TO
PURSUE SECULARIZATION OF SYRIAN STATE. THIS WAS A
MAJOR POLICY OF THE BAATH PARTY BUT ONE WHICH PREDATED EVEN
ITS 1963 ACCESSION TO POWER. PERHAPS THEREFORE A FURTHER REASON FOR
THE REGIME'S UNWILLINGNESS TO SANCTION EMIRGATION OF THE
JEWS WAS ITS UNWILLINGNESS TO ADMIT IT COULD NOT SATISFY
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THE NEEDS OF ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S SECTS. FINALLY, ONE SPECIFIC
REASON WE HAD HEARD WAS THAT SYRIAN LEADERSHIP WAS RELUCTANT
TO GIVE ITS ENEMIES IN IRAQ ANOTHER PROPAGANDA WEAPON TO USE
AGAINST SYRIA, DESPITE THE FACT IRAQ PERMITTED ITS JEWS OT
EMIGRATE.

6. AMBASSADOR NOTED THAT INTEREST IN WELFARE OF JEWISH
COMMUNITY SHOWN BY U.S. OFFICIALS, PRIVATE CITIZENS,
JOURNALISTS AND T.V. COMMENTATORS SUCH AS MIKE WALLACE,
HAD HEIGHTENED SYRIAN AWARENESS ABOUT THE BAD PUBLICITY
THEY HAD BEEN RECEIVING ON THE COMMUNITY'S STATUS.
SEVERAL IMPROVEMENTS HAD COME ABOUT OVER THE LAST FEW
YEARS AS TOP LEVELS OF SARG FOCUSED ON THE PROBLEM.
A DECISION HAD BEEN TAKEN IN RCENT WEEKS TO LIFT THE
MANY PETTY RESTRICTIONS AFFECTING THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY
WITHIN SYRIA; HOWEVER, NO PROGRESS HAD YET BEEN MADE ON THE
BASIC ISSUE OF TH RIGHT TO EMIGRATE.

7. AS SOLARZ HAD TOLD THE GROUP, HE ON HIS CURRENT VISIT
HAD PROBED WITH SARG POSSIBILITY OF ITS PERMITTING 400
UNMARRIED WOMEN TO LEAVE FOR THE U.S. TWO YEARS HAD PASSED
WITHOUT ACTION ON HIS EARLIER REQUEST THAT 20 CLOSE RELA-
TIVES OF AMERICAN CITIZENS BE ALLOWED TO LEAVE. IT WAS
NOT EASY TO EXPLAIN SYRIAN ADAMANCY ON THIS ISSUE BUT
CONVICTION IT WOLD SOMEHOW SERVE TO HELP ISRAEL APPEARED
TO BE THE MAJOR CONSIDERATION.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 8825

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8. JACOBSON SUGGESTED THAT CONDITIONING U.S. AID TO SYRIA ON JEWISH EMIGRATION MIGHT BE USEFUL. AMBASSADOR DISAGREED AND DESCRIBED SYRIA'S SENSITIVITY TO SLIGHTEST HINT OF FOREIGN PRESSURE TACTICS ON WHAT IT CONSIDERED ITS INTERNAL AFFAIRS. OPINED THAT SUCH AN APPROACH WOULD PROBABLY FAIL, ESPECIALLY GIVEN THE RELATIVELY SMALL IMPORTANCE OF OUR TRADE AND AID WITH SYRIA. JACOBSON SAID SHE WAS CONFIDENT THAT FORMULA COULD BE DEVISED WHICH WOULD NOT ENTIAL OUR MAKING A CRUDE THREAT.

9. JACOBSON EXPRESSED INTEREST IN IDEA OF PROVIDING SCHOLARSHIPS FOR SYRIAN JEWS TO STUDY IN U.S. AMBASSADOR NOTED THAT CONGRESSMAN SOLARZ HAD JUST RAISED THIS WITH HIM AND DISCUSSED IT PREVIOUS DAY WITH BOTH THE DAMASCUS COMMUNITY LEADERS AS WELL AS THE FONMINISTRY. IT HAD POSSIBILITIES BUT SINCE THIS IDEA HAD JUST BEEN TABLED, AMBASSADOR RECOMMENDED THAT HADASSAH GROUP AVOID PUSHING IT AND CONCENTRATE ANY DISCUSSION THEY MIGHT HAVE ON HUMANITARIAN ASPECTS OF ISSUE. THERE WAS RISK IF TOO MANY ADVOCATED
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IDEA OF SCHOLARSHIPS SIMULTANEOUSLY, THAT SYRIAN OFFICIALS WOULD SEE IT AS A TRANSPARENT ATTEMPT TO "END RUN" THEIR EMIGRATION POLICY.

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10. IN CLOSING, AMBASSADOR POINTED OUT THAT SYRIA'S
EXPERIENCE IN LEBANON OVER PAST YEAR HAD BEEN SOBERING.
SYRIA TODAY HAD A NEW APPETITE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
AND APPEARD INCREASINGLY FOCUSED ON ADVANCING WELFARE
OF ITS OWN CITIZENRY. REOIME HAD PURSUED POLICY OF OPENING
DOORS TO THE WEST WHILE MAINTAINING ITS LINKS WITH THE
COMMUNIST COUNTRIES. AS FER AS U.S. CONCERNED, THIS
POLICY HAD FOUND TANGIBLE EXPRESSION IN ASAD'S READINESS
TO REESTABLISH DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN 1974. SYRIA'S
RECEPTION OF THIS FIRST VISIT BY A HADASSAH GROUP WAS A
FURTHER XAMPLE OF THIS SELF-CONFIDENCE. HUBLICITY ABOUT
VISIT OVER ISRAEL RADION HAD NOT LEAD DAMASCUS TO BLOCK
GROUP'S ARRIVAL. SUCH A VISIT WOULD HAVE BEEN UNTHINKABLE
IN THE SYRIA OF THE 1960S. THIS NEW SELF-CONFIDENCE
PROMISED OPPORUTNITIES IN THE PACE PROCESS
AS WELL AS FOR PROGRESS ON SUCH DELICATE INTERNAL QUESTIONS
AS PERMITTING EMIGRATION OF SYRIAN JEWS.

11. AT BREAKFAST JUST PRIOR GROUP'S DEPARTURE DECEMBER 28,
JACOBSON INFORMED AMBASSADOR THAT SYRIAN MINISTER OF HEALTH
HAD PASSED WORD HE WAS UNABLE TO MEET WITH GROUP, SAYING
HE PREOCCUPIED WITH NUMBER OF MEETINGS FOLLOWING PRESIDENT
ASAD'S RETURN FROM CAIRO CONFERENCE. MINISTER OF CULTURE
HAD SIMILARLY BEEN UNAVAILABLE. HEALTH MINISTER HAD FACILITIATED
THEIR VISIT TO GOVERNMNT'S PRINCIPAL HOSPITAL IN DAMASCUS
AS WELL AS TO SMALLER PRIVATE HOSPITAL. SAID SHE WAS
IMPRESSED BY QUALITY OF GOVERNMENT CENTER COMPARED TO THOSE
SHE HAD VISITED IN EGYPT. JACOBSON MENTIONED GROUP'S
DISAPPOINTMENT THAT SYRIAN JEWISH GIRLS INVITED TO MEET
GROUP AT HOTEL PREVIOUS EVENING HAD FAILED TO APPEAR.
SHE APPEARED UNDERSTAND REASONS FOR THAT, RECALLING FEAR OF
SOVIET JEWS TO MEET WITH AMERICAN JEWS TEN YEARS AGO.
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SHE EXPRESSED SURPRISE AT NUMBER OF CHILDREN SEEN AT JEWISH
COMMUNITY SCHOOL AND SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT MIGHT HAVE PACKED
IT FOR OCCASSION OF THE GROUP'S VISIT. (WE POINTED OUT
LARGE SIZE OF SYRIAN FAMILIES OF ALL SECTS.) SHE DISCUSSED
ISRAELI CONCERNS ABUT FUTURE RETURN OF SYRIANS TO GOLAN HEIGHTS
WHICH SHE TERMED ESSENTIAL TO ISRAELI DEFENSE. RE KUNAITRA,
SHE HELD IT INCOMPREHENSIBLE THAT SYRIANS HAD NOT RECONSTRUCTED
THAT CITY. WHEN IT WAS POINTED OUT THAT KUNAITRA'S PRINCIPAL
AGRICULTURAL LANDS WERE NOW IN ISRAELI HANDS, SHE EXPRESSED
VIGOROUS DISBELIEF AND CAUTIONED AGAINST LOCALITIS.

12. COMMENT:

SYRIAN OFFICIALS AND JEWS ALIKE KEPT CAREFUL DISTANCE
FROM THIS GROUP. NONETHELESSBN I CONSIDER THE HADASSAH VISIT

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WAS A USEFUL IF LIMITED INITIAL CONTACT BETWEEN ORDINARY
SYRIANS AND REPRESENTATIVES OF A MAJOR AMERICAN JEWISH
ORGANIZATION. I HOPE, AS I TOLD MS. JACOBSON, IT WILL BE
FIRST OF OTHER TO COME. IT WAS STIMULATING TO MEET SO
FORMIDABLE A PERSONALITY.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: JEWS, COMMUNITY RELATIONS, SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 28 DEC 1976
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: CunninFX
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976DAMASC08825
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760474-0137
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19761211/aaaaaitb.tel
Line Count: 283
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Reference: 77 STATE 270455, 77 STATE 298502, 77 DAMASCUS 7648
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: CunninFX
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 10 JUN 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <10 JUN 2004 by BoyleJA>; APPROVED <04 OCT 2004 by CunninFX>
Review Markings:

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04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: HADASSAH VISIT TO DAMASCUS - STATUS OF SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY.
TAGS: PFOR, SY, US, HADASSAH, (JACOBSON, CHARLOTTE)
To: STATE
Type: TE
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